

Letters to the Editor
The Washington Post

To the Editor:

For the Montgomery County Council, getting the budget to the Charter Limit was not easy, clean, tightly organized, nor straightforward. We were clearing the brush as we hiked the trail. But that was what made the result of our well-chronicled odyssey so satisfying.

As we believe the County charter requirements always intended, the Council's process resulted in an unquestionably clear and honest public debate about priorities, financial challenges and responsible solutions.

Since last December when we initiated the effort to set homeowners' property tax relief as our budgetary goal, the Council's give and take has reflected the competing objectives of a progressive community. In the end, everyone gave a little, and, in our minds, the community got a lot. We continue to be committed to academic excellence, transportation enhancements, public safety, a safety net for our most vulnerable residents and maintenance of quality services.

Significantly, because of the Council's action on property taxes, the average residential property owner will keep about \$300 this year.

But what about the future? While "property tax relief" cannot be a rallying cry for turning our backs on community needs, it certainly cannot be ignored. Is a charter restriction limiting property tax growth to the rate of inflation reasonable given the real costs of employee benefits and the needs of a community increasingly forsaken by federal and state officials? It works only if our efforts to shift some costs to other resources can continue. The charter limit objective will never be easy to satisfy in our environment of big ticket transportation and transit needs, affordable housing issues, and a growing community of children, seniors and vulnerable residents seeking services.

Would any one of us have done it differently? There can be no question that each of us would have preferred a different arrangement of priorities and resource solutions. But in our world, it takes seven to tango because our County charter required it. At least seven very disparate views had to reach agreement about fundamental community priorities. Schools, transportation, our most vulnerable residents, and public safety won the day. That all nine of us came to consensus demonstrated the extent to which those core value objectives were supported by all in this budget.

That was huge and the point of the Charter rule in the first place, isn't it?

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